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NOTES AND COMMENTS.

I.

THE AMERICAN CONSULAR SERVICE.

It is surprising that, with all that has been said, argued, and attempted to be done to reform our civil service during the past ten years, so little attention has been paid by orators and legislators to the need of reforming the consular system. For if there is any branch of the public service to which the ordinarily-accepted maxims of civil-service reform should apply, which needs a thorough overhauling and readjustment on a business basis, it is that branch to which the commercial interests and the individual rights of American citizenship abroad are committed. A recent writer has perhaps gone too far in saying that "the consular service is of very little benefit to the country"; but it is true that its practical reform would very greatly enlarge its benefit. Why the consular system has not been placed within the scope of the civil-service rules already established, it is difficult for any one who has any knowledge of the defects of that system—defects serious and of long continuance—to comprehend.

To our consuls abroad are committed two principal and essentially distinct tasks, according to the locality of the consulates. The principal duty of a consul at a seaport is to see that the laws relating to the American ships and crews arriving at or departing from that port are carried out; to protect the masters in their relations with the port authorities, and to protect the crews both against the masters and as temporary sojourners in a foreign land. The principal duty of a consul at an inland manufacturing or exporting town is to examine and certify to the truth of the invoices of goods exported thence to the United States. Other duties of consuls in both kinds of consulates are to protect the rights of individual American citizens when they are threatened in the locality; to make reports to the home government on the commercial condition of the consular district; and to represent the nation officially on public occasions. The gravity of these duties varies, of course, according to the importance, in its relations to the United States, of the locality; and it may be added parenthetically here that one defect of our consular system is that the salaries of consuls are very unequal, and are by no means scaled according to the relative importance and responsibilities of the consulships.

There is, moreover, another function of consuls, which is not enjoined by any law, which, indeed, it would not be easy to define in strict legal phrase, and which to some minds may present a somewhat sentimental aspect; but which, when we consider how vigorous a force sentiment has always been in influencing human affairs, should be regarded as far from unimportant. This is the duty the consul should fulfil of representing, in his person, bearing, and attainments, American enlightenment, intelligence, and refinement in the presence of a foreign community. Such a community will necessarily make large inferences as to the social condition of the country by observing its official representative. The consul, especially in a provincial city or town, is a not inconspicuous person. He dines with the mayor and other officials; he is usually invited into the best society; a place of honor is assigned him on public occasions. It is not difficult to see that his personal influence, as a result of his personal character and bearing, will be a factor in the efficient exercise of his official duties, and still less so to perceive that his personal and social qualities will have much to do with the judgment which the community will form of the mass of his countrymen.

What, then, should be the qualifications of our consuls, in order that this service should become, not a doubtful, but a large and substantial, benefit to the nation? It would seem that those qualifications should not only be readily guessed, but that they should be recognized and strictly required by the general government. That an official upon whom the duties which have been outlined are to devolve should be a man of good general education; that he should have a good knowledge of, and the power to use readily and correctly, the English language; that, if serving in Continental Europe, he should be conversant both with French and with the tongue of the country in which he is to reside; that he should have the laws regulating the consular service at his fingers' ends, and be well informed in United States commercial law, and have some familiarity, at least, with international law, would seem to be propositions above the region of dispute. And none the less clear would it seem to be that these qualifications, one and all, should be subjected to a searching examination, in accordance with the principle of civil-service reform.

But there is one important duty imposed upon consuls posted at inland importing towns, the ability to perform which cannot, perhaps, be readily ascertained by an examination made previous to its assumption. The vexed question of the undervaluation of invoices has fitfully made its appearance in public discussion during the past few years. It is a question of undoubted importance, since fraud in the importation of goods from abroad attacks both the revenues of the state and the business interests of honest merchants. There is no space here to discuss the subject of undervaluations in a large sense; but that subject nearly concerns that of the efficiency of consuls. Under our revenue system, two detectives are set upon the importations of goods into the country to see to it that these importations are in character and price what the invoices which describe them represent them to be. One of these detectives is the consul resident at the point of manufacture or export; the other is the home custom-house. Goods which are undervalued by invoice must pass both these portals in order to enter into unfair competition with honestly-invoiced goods; and if they do so pass, it is by reason of the ignorance and inefficiency of the official guardians of our commercial interests. Now it is the duty of the consul—a duty which, there can be no doubt, many consuls, under our present system, ignore and neglect—to become an expert in the goods exported to the United States from his district; to require, as he has a right to do, samples of every article described in every invoice presented to him for certification; to submit such samples, in cases of narrow margins of price and cases in which he is in doubt, to competent judges of the goods on the spot; and in case of the detection of an undervaluation, to report it promptly to the home government, and thus secure a just confiscation of goods.

Lastly, an American consul should be an American gentleman. He should have good manners and a good address, tact, courtesy, good habits, both of business and of personal conduct, social as well as business ability. He need not in the least abate his patriotic belief in or affection for the democratic institutions and society of his own country; nor should he, on the other hand, go out of his way to manifest contempt of the different institutions of the country where he finds himself posted.

At present, as in the past, it cannot be said that consuls are selected by our government with sole or, in very many instances, with prevailing reference to their fitness to fill their offices efficiently. A consulship amid the historic monuments, the artistic splendors, and the natural beauties of the Old World, seems an enchanting prospect, not only to the hack political worker, but to the scholar and man-of-letters. No office is more eagerly sought for; and, it is not pleasant to add, no office is more frequently bestowed, without a thought as to qualifications, as a reward of personal friendship, or of political service, or as an easy method of getting rid of an unfortunate relative. A consul thus appointed, and indifferent to his duties, may, no doubt, spend an easy and pleasant four or eight years in Europe. A conscientious and efficient consul, on the other hand, will find his duties grave, and will accept and respond to serious responsibilities.

To make the consular service really efficient and valuable to the country, then, it should be placed within the scope of the civil-service rules. An examination

should prove the candidate to be generally intelligent, endowed with business capacities, skilful and correct in his English, possessing a good knowledge of French and the language of the country of his residence, and endowed with a good character, good habits, and good manners. Efficient service in the consulate should insure not only retention in office, but promotion in due course. This would remove from the consul not only the feeling that it was not worth while to attend to his duties, since his removal was probable at the end of his term, but the temptation to "make the most" of his tenure so long as it existed.

There is only one more feature of the service apparently capable of improvement, which can just be touched upon. The consuls in Europe are, at the best, three thousand miles from their responsible chief. Would it not be well to create a superior officer nearer at hand? Would not the service be improved if the consul-general at the chief centre of a country—say at London or Paris—should be made the responsible chief of the consuls resident in that country, keeping watch over them, giving them instructions when necessary, and consulting with them as occasion demanded?

GEORGE MAKEPEACE TOWLE.

II.

A LEGISLATIVE KINDERGARTEN.

THIS great land of ours abounds in all sorts of educational institutions. In one cooking is taught, and the graduates on exhibition offer doughnuts and croquettes, instead of essays and disquisitions. Others take a grist of raw boys and run them through the hopper of applied journalism. Others, again, teach political economy according to the American plan, which abhors reason and theory. Telegraphy, type-writing, plumbing—but I am not Walt Whitman and I fear my catalogue would be as dull as the second book of the "Iliad." Besides, I do not wish now to be eulogistic, but suggestive, and to point out a lack. There is one great lack that, it is surprising to me, has as yet never suggested itself to the enlightened minds of our Republic. And that is a legislative kindergarten.

It is a perpetual surprise to most people that Congress each year accomplishes so little and wastes so much. There is a gathering of men chosen presumably for superior merit or talent or experience. Most towns are rather proud that Senator So-and-so or Mr. Blank, M. C., lives within their limits. We may indulge in sarcasm, but we are glad to see "my friend the Senator." Each man in Congress may be considered to be in some way above the average. Why on earth, then, is the aggregate of these great men so disappointing? It is a curious phenomenon: a session of Congress is a disorderly bedlam, a seat of idiotic gambols, a pathetic ambuscade of incompetency, a bear-pit of rascality, where all that should be done is neglected and everything unworthy is perpetrated. Not one single man out of that assembly would ever think of doing such foolish things as they all do when put together. It is almost incomprehensible; but the explanation is utterly simple—so simple, in fact, that so far as I know it has never been pointed out.

It is this: each new legislature is an infant, and as irresponsible as an infant. You do not expect staid gravity from a yearling. What is an infant? His little body, so apparently fresh and new, is made up of constituents that are as old as the hills. Star-dust may make the circuit of his veins; the perished leviathan that swallowed Jonah may, by only a few metamorphoses, be built into his bones; Solomon's very brain may be represented in his occiput. He is the resultant of a million intellects—who knows? His spirit may be the spirit reborn of one who but a twelvemonth back, was expecting obedience and most loath to render it. Then, again, so far as we know, thousands of living organisms swarm through his frame, as conscious of their own happiness, and as unconscious of his, as devoted to their own affairs, as long-lived in proportion, as any man. Yet that infant, bristling with all ages, full of all wisdoms, containing a macrocosm, kicks up its heels, crows, creeps into the fire, carries his spoon to the ear instead of the mouth, is toothless, helpless, vacuous, cruel, everything bad and everything good, the darling of our hearts, and the last person to look to for practical wisdom!

So the legislature, made up of separate Solons, becomes a new entity, as hope